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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*The Central American "Unity" Government:
A New Brand of Continuismo?*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
18 October 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Central American "Unity" Government:
A New Brand of Continuismo?

Summary

The latest style in Central American democratic window-dressing appears to be early national unity. Two countries, Honduras and Nicaragua, have developed temporary "national unity" pacts which award most governmental positions to members of their two dominant parties, ostensibly to end the partisan strife that has plagued both countries for over a century. It is increasingly obvious, however, that the pacts are ploys by strongmen whose terms of office are legally terminated to disguise continuismo. In any event, bitter political divisions and inexperience with the free play of democratic processes would preclude the success of these experiments.

In Honduras the unity government is already operative but on shaky ground. Nicaragua's will not begin until next May, but the interim government is more likely to last its projected term.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.

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Selected Examples of Continuismo

Rafael Carrera (24 years)
1838-44 Power behind presidents
1844-48 President until exiled in 1848
1851-65 Made President for life in 1857, died 1875

Manuel Estrada Cabrera (22 years)
1898-1920 Succeeded to office on death of his predecessor; remained in office through farcical re-elections until removed in 1920 as mentally incompetent

Jorge Ubico (13 years)
1931-44 Extended his term in 1935 by plebiscite; constitutional assembly in 1941 extended term to 1949; general strike deposed him in 1944

Francisco Ferrara (6 years)
1841-45 2 terms of 2 yrs each by re-election
1845-47 Controlled successor's regime

Polcarpo Bonilla (10 years)
1893-1899 Proclaimed himself President
1899-1903 Power behind successor

Tiburcio Carías Andino (16 years)
1933-49 Elected in 1933; term extended to 1943 by 1936 constitution; amendment in 1933 extended term to 1949.

Tomas Martínez (10 years)
1857-67 Original 4-yr term extended by constitutional amendment

Jose Santos Zelaya (16 years)
1893-1909 "Re-elected" twice under 1893 constitution; 1903 constitution gave him a 6-yr term; deposed 1905

Anastasio Somoza García (22 years)
1934-36 Controlled gov't through National Guard
1936-40 Legal term
1940-47 Transitory term granted by 1939 constitution
1947-51 Power behind several puppets
1951-56 Elected to 6-yr term; assassinated in 1956 when he decided to run again

Carlos Meléndez (14 years)
1913-15 Finished predecessor's term
1915-19 Elected to own term
1919-23 Power behind brother
1923-27 Power behind brother-in-law

Maximiliano Hernández Martínez (13 years)
1931-34 Finished predecessor's term
1934-39 Elected to own term
1939-44 1939 constitution extended term to 1945; another in 1944 extended term to 1949; general strike deposed him 3 months later

Juan Manuel Mora (10 years)
1849-53 Completed predecessor's term
1853-59 Elected to 6-yr term; deposed after his 3rd inauguration

Rafael Iglesias (8 years)
1894-1902 Constitutional amendment in 1898 made possible his "re-election"

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Background

1. "National unity" government is a new phenomenon in Central America, developed out of the special needs of two governments to placate their opposition parties. Costa Rica and El Salvador have no need for such an arrangement. In Costa Rica, where the ballot has long been respected, the government has changed hands with each election since 1948. In El Salvador, though the democratic process is on less firm ground, opposition parties have made substantial gains since the introduction of proportional representation for the legislature in 1963. In Guatemala, on the other hand, political divisions are so deep and bitter that consideration of a joint venture in government is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

2. The political systems of both Honduras and Nicaragua are dominated by highly personalistic parties whose bitter antagonism has generated unrest for almost a century. These parties and their leaders have shown no generosity toward the opposition when in power, no willingness to relinquish power gracefully when defeated, and no constructive opposition when on the sidelines. Free elections have been the exception. The rule has been for a president to remain in power by force or fraud for extended periods of time, ignoring constitutional provisions prohibiting re-election. Dictators have amended the constitution to permit re-election; they have extended the presidential term; they have declared the incumbent "president for life." Some have played *eminence grise* while a relative or pawn filled the presidency, and others have used military force to stay in office.

3. In Nicaragua, the Somoza family has held a virtual monopoly on political power since the early 1930s, when General Anastasio Somoza Garcia--father of the incumbent--solidified his control over both the Liberal Party and the National Guard. The once strong Conservative Party, weakened by more than four decades out of power, finds itself begging a few political crumbs from the Liberal banquet table.

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The Honduran Unity Pact

I. The Executive

President and 3 vice presidential running mates elected by direct popular vote.

Cabinet

President's party names Ministers of Government and Justice, Presidency, Defense, Economy, Finance, and Education

Losing party names Ministers of Foreign Relations, Labor, Public Works, Health, Natural Resources, and Communications.

Bureaucracy—all offices including ambassadorial posts distributed equally between the two parties.

II. The Legislature—64 seats

President's party names 32 deputies; president of National Congress is a member of winning party and has an extra tie-breaking vote.

Losing party names 32 deputies

III. The Judiciary

Supreme Court—9 members

President's party names 4 Justices

Losing party names 5 Justices including the president of the Supreme Court

Lower courts—judgeships distributed equally between the two parties.



Gen. Oswaldo Lopez



**Minister of Government and
Justice Ricardo Zuniga**



Pres. Ramon Ernesto Cruz

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Although the 1950 constitution and its subsequent amendments have guaranteed legal opposition parties one third of the congress and the judiciary, both of these branches of government are in practice subservient to the executive, and there has been no provision for opposition participation in the executive branch. Furthermore, the government can regulate which parties participate in the legislative and judicial branches by granting or withholding legal inscription.

4. In Honduras, the governing National Party is probably the smaller--though better organized--of the two parties. It came to power in 1963 when General Oswaldo Lopez staged a coup to prevent the almost certain election of a second Liberal president. Since then the Liberal Party has been alienated by consistently rigged elections. During his eight years in office, Lopez spoke often of the need for the two parties to work together; he occasionally offered the Liberals one or two minor cabinet posts as evidence of his sincerity and feigned injured feelings when his offers were rejected as poor substitutes for free elections.

5. As the end of their terms approached, both presidents, Somoza of Nicaragua and Lopez of Honduras, were reluctant to release the reins of government. Both could probably have won re-election had their constitutions permitted it, and both have sufficient military support to retain control by force. Somoza and Lopez were concerned, however, that despair among the "outs" was pushing the opposition toward subversion. This, along with a growing understanding that the old crude ways of holding power were blackening the national image, led the two strongmen to embrace national unity schemes. Somoza opted for an interim government of two and a half years (instead of the full five-years) and an agreement that he could run for the presidency again in 1974. The plan was sugar-coated for the opposition which is to have a greater participation in the legislative and judicial branches and some share of the executive functions.

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6. Lopez appears to have planned a somewhat different route for his return to office. The "unity" government he devised has a more equal division of offices, but, because of this, the system will be so slow, cumbersome, and inefficient that Lopez will have a built-in excuse to return to power whenever he decides to do so.

Honduras: A poor beginning

7. The unity government in Honduras took office barely four months ago and is already showing the strains of conflicting political ambitions. President Ramon Cruz, the respected but aging National Party candidate, won the 28 March 1971 election with 52.5 percent of the votes, narrowly defeating his Liberal opponent. Because of his ineffectiveness in some matters, his intransigence in others, and the control exerted from behind the scenes by powerful interest groups, he has been unable to govern. The unstable conditions confronting his government since its inauguration on 6 June show no signs of abatement, and most observers see little chance that the unity government will last the scheduled six years.

8. The terms of the unity pact itself are in many ways to blame for Cruz' problems. The only choice permitted the electorate was between the Liberal and Nationalist slates for the president and three vice presidential running mates. Despite the nominal equality of participation, the National Party has a slight edge in running the government. Much to the dismay of President Cruz, however, it is National Party leader Ricardo Zuniga, the Machiavellian power behind the Lopez regime, who has become the central figure. Out of 12 cabinet members, (six Nationalists and six Liberals) Cruz was able to impose only two, the ministers of the presidency and of education. The other four Nationalist ministers were dictated by Zuniga, who even took one ministry, Government and Justice, for himself. Furthermore, through his control of the legislature, Zuniga had many of the "pork barrel" projects transferred to the Ministry of Government

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and Justice from the Ministry of the Presidency--the cabinet post he held under the previous administration.

9. The problems faced by Cruz--student and teacher violence and bickering between the two political parties over division of the spoils--could be the result of Zuniga's behind-the-scenes manipulating, although his objectives are still obscure. Much of the disorder may have been planned to show Cruz who is really running the country or to force replacement of the minister of education by someone of Zuniga's own choosing. On the other hand, the disorders of the past several months may be part of a longer term plan to overthrow the "unity" government by sustaining a level of unrest that invites military intervention.

10. The only person capable of leading a military coup is the former president, General Lopez, chief of the armed forces. As the end of his presidential term approached, Lopez appeared more and more reluctant to release the reins of power. He had not groomed a military successor and had frequently spoken disparagingly of the ability of civilian politicians to govern. He probably negotiated the "unity" pact--with all its restrictions and ambiguities--in the expectation that it would prove him right. His selection of the ineffectual Cruz as the National Party candidate may have been a way of ensuring sufficient instability to justify his return to power. Aside from Lopez, who would be more than willing to return to office and "save the country," the greatest beneficiary of a coup would be the ambitious Zuniga.

Nicaragua: More Hope for Success

11. Nicaragua's approach to national unity contains fewer concessions to the opposition but may, for this reason, prove less chaotic. The concessions, moreover, may be sufficient to encourage the Conservative Party to play a more constructive role.

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Opposition Participation in Nicaragua

Present (1950) Constitution

I. Executive

President elected by direct popular vote for a five-year term

Cabinet selected by President.

II. Legislature

Both houses of bicameral Congress have at least 1/3 opposition membership

III. Judiciary

Supreme Court—7 members; 2 from opposition; life tenure

Lower courts—1/3 of judgeships from opposition



Fernando Aguero

Interim Government

I. Executive

Troika of two Liberals and one Conservative chosen by respective parties

Cabinet selected by majority party; second place party in constituent assembly elections shall name an advisor for each ministry and autonomous agency

II. Legislature

Constituent Assembly of 100 delegates, 60 from majority party and 40 from minority parties, will act as a legislature and revise constitution

III. Judiciary

Supreme Court—no change

Lower courts—no change except that opposition will name district attorney for each court where judge is a Liberal

Government after 1974

I. Executive

President elected by direct popular vote for six-year term

Cabinet selected by President

II. Legislature

Both houses of bicameral Congress will have at least 40% opposition membership

III. Judiciary

Supreme Court—7 members, 3 from opposition; 6-year term

Lower courts—40% of judgeships from opposition



Anastasio Somoza

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12. The pact, negotiated early this year between Fernando Aguero, head of the Conservative Party, and President Somoza, provides for an interim government for the 30 months beginning 1 May 1972. During this time a constituent assembly (to be elected in February) will act as a legislature and will ratify constitutional revisions already agreed upon by the two party leaders. The transitional government will also oversee the correction and updating of the voter registration roles in preparation for regular general elections in late 1974. This, plus the fact that OAS observers will be present during those elections (an opposition request consistently denied by Somoza in the past) cause the Conservatives to believe they will have a better chance to win. One item remains unsettled: Somoza has offered the Conservatives control of the electoral machinery in six of the 16 departments; Aguero is holding out for seven.

13. A potential danger of the arrangement arises from the differing goals of the two leaders. Aguero, whose party had for so long been without hope of attaining power through the electoral process and at times has resorted to violence, sees the pact as a way not only to strengthen his party and his own prestige but to preserve the two-party system. He also believes that the interim government may be a route to real power for the Conservatives, even eventual control of the government. Somoza, too, hopes to invigorate the Conservative Party--not as an effective part of a two-party system, but as a tame opposition that will provide the trappings of a democratic system.

14. A second source of trouble is the omission of a substantial minority of the electorate from the arrangement. The smaller, non-Communist parties of the democratic left, principally the Social Christians, have been effectively disenfranchised through denial of legal status. Moreover, substantial segments of the two traditional parties disapprove the pact. One such group, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro's Conservative National Action, has already split away from the Conservatives and

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now finds itself unable to gain legal status. Another group, the Ramiro Sacasa wing of the Liberal Party, views the pact as a perpetuation of Somoza's personal rule, which will weaken the Liberal Party in the long run by denying it a chance to develop a reserve of leaders.

15. If Somoza and Aguero can keep their respective parties relatively intact and work together within the terms of the pact, the transitional government may provide stability over the next three years. However, the cumbersome nature of the three-man executive, the personal animosities within the two traditional groups, and the parties' past inability to work together dim that prospect. Indeed, the near hatred most Conservatives feel toward the Somoza family and the bitter rivalry between the two parties have plunged the country into open violence as recently as the 1967 election campaign. Both Somoza and Aguero are casting their eyes on the presidency in 1974, and unless some real spirit of national cooperation--or at least mutual respect--can be developed, the 1974 campaign could become as violent as the last one.

Conclusions

16. The success of a government of national unity requires some common purpose or goal. If the real objective of either the Nicaraguan or the Honduran unity pact were to reduce political strife, greater political maturity might be expected. But since both pacts developed from desires and objectives other than the stated ones, no such optimism is warranted. In Honduras the government is already tottering, mainly because the President is ignoring the real sources of power in the country and his own role as a puppet or sacrificial lamb. If General Lopez believes it expedient to continue with the charade of "unity," a more tractable "president" may be installed. Lopez, however, would not hesitate to sacrifice both President Cruz and the "unity" government if he felt it in his own best interest or were pushed into it by others who could be causing turmoil for that purpose. In Nicaragua

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the potential for disorder is reduced--at least for the time of the transitional government--by the realization of most Nicaraguans that power is still in the hands of Somoza backed by the National Guard. Problems may develop in 1974 if the Conservatives become overly optimistic and are disappointed in the election results.

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